

Chapter 17

FORMS, POLITICS, MAKERS, AND CONTEXTS:
BASIC ISSUES FOR A THEORY OF
RADICAL POLITICAL DOCUMENTARY

Chuck Kleinhans

This manifesto of pragmatic, ideological and aesthetic considerations for radical media workers is a fitting conclusion to and summation of this section of eleven articles on contemporary committed documentary in the West. Based on the author's experiences within a community and movement of artists and activists, and on both his exemplary self-awareness and unflinching criticism of a variety of examples of recent work, this piece of theory-in-progress (as all theory must be) presents no small challenge to readers of this volume, both media-makers and media-users.

Radical film/video makers today, if they are to make genuinely liberating work, films and tapes that contribute to fundamental change, must examine their own taken-for-granted ideas and behavior: about society, about politics, about their medium and its techniques. About everything, because they need critical awareness as a vital part of media that can deal with the dynamics of personal and institutional change. Makers have to think like political organizers--with both intensity and distance, attention to the immediate and the long range, to the tactical and the strategic, and to the individual and the group--in other words to the complexity and richness of the immediate historical moment and its potentials and possibilities.

But today we're a long way from that point. Most politically engaged documentaries are made because the people making them have been strongly committed to the project, doing it as a hopefully socially significant and personally rewarding task. All too often, films and tapes are made primarily for reasons of individual commitment and are not accompanied by other, more complex political reasoning. It often seems that only a distinct minority of makers have analyzed political forces, examined changing conditions, considered various analyses, thought about who the audiences are for their work, what the practical need for it is, how people might use it, the most cost- / and time-efficient medium and format, what distribution and exhibition channels are available, and how those considerations could and should shape their work. At the same time, for more than a decade we've seen hot debates by theorists and critics and copious examples by film/video makers around matters of a radical documentary practice. For both documentarists and theorists today, in the Reagan-Thatcher era, I think it's necessary to survey the field less dogmatically and to rethink some basic questions.

Any adequate theory of radical political documentary must have a dynamic relation to media practice and political activism in its own historical moment. Theory never emerges as a pure timeless abstraction but always in relation to changing political, social, and communication concerns and situations. With time and changing conditions, theoretical emphases shift and different issues become the center of concern. In the late '60s and early '70s some key questions about documentary were posed differently. Then both critics and documentarists raised questions about production technology, especially about portable sync sound film and video, as well as matters of group organization (collective, hierarchical, etc.) and arguments about genius (variously interpreted and shaded as the discussants varied in or referred to others' commitment, sincerity, personal vision, experience, celebrity, inspiration, etc.). Today these matters seem less relevant and secondary to issues of forms, politics, makers and contexts.¹

To have genuinely radical political documentary activity today, we have to work on four basic issues. First, we have to interrogate film and video form and its use in documentary work. In particular we must question the tendency to formalism--of both the left and the right varieties. This tendency assumes that one kind of correct form exists

and that it will solve other problems. Second, we have to consider the variety of ways in which a documentary can sent politics, and we must be alert to the problems of how a documentary can avoid hard issues through reformism or simplify the question into ultraradicalism. Third, we have to consider the maker's position--political, personal, historical, social, and institutional. Fourth, we have to think about the film/video work's context--the historical moment in which it is produced, distributed, and exhibited, and the audience it reaches. Keeping such interrelated issues in mind, we can then construct a theory of radical documentary on a more sophisticated basis and enact a more effective film/video practice.

Radical documentary in all its media--still and moving image, audio, verbal and written, etc.--has always had at least two basic inescapable functions. Some examples and documentary genres almost exclusively use these two functions: witnessing and affecting. To witness is to say this happened, look at this--this was a concentration camp, people are demonstrating for their rights, this is what napalm does to children, these are American cluster bombs being used against noncombatant civilians, etc. Given the overt censorship, the covert self-censorship, and the deliberate lies propagated by the dominant order, clearly the simple use of images as witness is itself often radical. To affect is to move: let this touch you, let this shock you or surprise you, make you weep or scream with anger, let this affect your heart, your emotions, your unconsciousness, body, let this move you to act, to resist, and to change. This is always the other function of documentary, even when presented in a deliberately cool or rational style.

These functions of documentary always operate to some extent, but the films and tapes I want to discuss here go a step further because they interpret and analyze as well. They elaborate the "here is..." and they shape the viewers' response in a deliberate direction. Yet we need to go even further for a truly radical documentary. We need to teach people how to analyze things themselves in order to give them more power to act in their own future. As Julia Lesage has put it, we have to produce a radical media which deals with structure--with how things are and the underlying forces which make them that way--and with contradiction--with the differences and oppositions within a situation which indicate how change might take place.² To witness, move, and interpret is not enough. We must also produce radical

documentaries which deal with why things are the way they are and how they might change and be changed.

Form

Formalism is the most seductive mistake in political documentary. By placing form over content, meaning, and actual effect on an audience, formalists try to escape from the problems of politics, their own relation to their work, and their work's context and reception. By assuming that they can solve these problems simply through using the correct form, they find a quick, easy, and almost always badly misguided solution to what are at heart political questions.

One kind of formalism often goes unrecognized. This is the formalism of documentary makers who tend to use old forms, well-known and accepted styles, which in fact have become tired clichés. Again and again we see political documentary following the typical network TV format in structural organization: opening dramatic example, quick discursive presentation of issue, mini-history, conflict-oriented presentation around a central figure or between two sides, appeal to "experts," and final indication of solution through legislation or change of heart. Specific techniques accompany this structure which vary only slightly from network to network and country to country. Such techniques include the use of authoritative narrator, maps and charts, talking-head interviews, "neutral" point of view shooting and editing, etc. In many ways this form is guided by pre-production considerations such as initial and continued financing, the hope for PBS or educational or art-house-circuit distribution, the maker and crew's previous formal and on-the-job training, and the taken-for-granted assumption of industry standards both in equipment and in the use of it. Films and tapes in the dominant culture have to be "smooth" and "perfect" precisely because they have to cover over social cracks and contradictions. In fetishizing what already exists, this contemporary "realistic" documentary form echoes the already known.

Usually, makers and producers justify this by saying you have to use familiar forms to reach a large audience and that more experimental forms cannot be used because people do not understand them. It's a Lawrence Welk approach that ignores the actual nature of visual literacy in our Atari

culture. A four-year-old with access to television comes to symbolic consciousness both visually and verbally while immersed in complex image/sound combinations; the child does so while watching commercials as well as many of the animated and documentary segments of children's shows. To make films that will reach people "where they are at," in media culture now means to use familiar forms such as rapid montage editing, nontraditional cutting, layered sound and images, and metaphoric and symbolic images. For better or worse, Music Television represents the audiovisual norm of most adolescents today.

Most political film and video makers lag sadly behind the times in terms of communication techniques. As a result their work is often dull, static, boring, and even insulting to the audience. Their work succeeds often in of the form, not because of it. In order to change, documentarists must study other kinds of film and video and learn from these how to make more imaginative, creative, and exciting work.

While a more exploratory documentary practice in the avant-garde, often, on closer examination, cases turn out to be reversed from the dominant ideology but still symmetrical with it. Experimental formalism rests on the belief in a content-free area, a world of pure forms that determine how audiences will receive the work. From this perspective, just change the form and you automatically arrive in a new place. This argument has gained force in the last decade by the arguments of theorists who have pointed out the weakness of traditional and new realist forms. For example, Eileen McGarry's essay, "Documentary Realism and Women's Cinema,"³ exposes the central fallacies of *cinéma vérité* in political filmmaking. Slipping into the easy assumption that a self-reflexive form contradicts naive political realism, some makers and theorists look to the highly self-conscious art of the high culture marketplace as providing the only way out. In contrast, a number of critics and theorists argue for a more sophisticated understanding of formal options and their use. Julia Lesage discusses how some feminist filmmakers use the already-existing political form of the consciousness-raising group to create a new cinematic discourse. Bill Nichols analyzes forms of documentary address or voice--the way the work speaks to its audience--to point out a newly emergent heterogeneity in radical documentary. In specific historical and critical studies, other writers have similarly argued for a variety

of innovative forms appropriate to new political realities.⁴

The issue of form often becomes oversimplified, treated with expediency rather than deliberation. If we remain aware of the ideological nature of forms, be they realist or avant-garde, we can expand our options to embrace a variety of forms which depend on context, audience, intention, and other concerns for effect. We can also be open to using new forms, mixing and creating forms appropriate to new political forces, and new voices within the progressive coalition.

Politics

Politics in documentary work certainly remains an intractable question, as evidenced by the number of neurotic responses to challenges on this issue. As I have argued, political arguments are often displaced onto the question of form and then disposed of by invoking a formula. Another frequent strategy, often favored by makers, is to simply answer a challenge by evoking the maker's good intentions or to denounce the bad intentions others may have deduced from the work itself; the maker may also defend her/himself by appealing to membership in or sympathy for this or that organization or lifestyle. But these in fact evade the central issue. That can be brought forward only by asking directly: what are the politics of the work? Does it accurately present those politics? And are those good politics?

Two major problems face today's radical media person, and both of these have to do with the nature of the radical movement in our time: first, understanding and presenting the complex interrelation of issues, and second, finding a place between co-optable reformism and ultraradical purism.

On the level of content, many political documentaries underestimate their audience by soft-peddling their message and sanitizing its radical content, even when those films take on a supposedly militant subject matter. In opposition to this, I argue that not only can people understand more than radical media typically present, but also that if radical media are to play a leading role in the movement, they must

deal with political questions in much greater detail and complexity.

The standards for a good radical film and video documentary should be the same as those for good political journalism. This includes a thorough investigation, an understanding of the history and development of the matter being documented, and an honesty in presenting the living complexity of the situation and its politics. Clearly, the standards for a short agitational film or tape made to provoke discussion, emphasize an issue, or move people to a specific decision or action will be different than those for a long analytical work. Yet often extended radical works present simplistic and sanitized versions of their subject. For example, the popular "oral history" interview films--Union Maids, With Babies and Banners, and Rosie the Riveter--erase their interviewees' connections with and sometimes actual membership in the Communist Party and other left organizations. By reproducing anti-communist ideology, such works easily become co-opted, and their widespread use makes it that much harder to get audiences to facts that even conservative mainstream historians acknowledge--for example, that the initial CIO organizing drive led by Communist organizers.⁵

While historical documentaries can be faulted for inaccuracy and distortion compared with other historical accounts and interpretations, the current-reportage documentary often escapes criticism because it assumes an authority in a vacuum. Yet without fuller and deeper analysis, such films often date instantly. A particular pertinent example is Finally Got the News, a report on one organization in the militant Black labor and community movement in Detroit in the early '70s.⁶ By the time the film was distributed the organization had split; yet the film never gave any indication of different forces and positions to begin with. Of course, documentary makers cannot be clairvoyant, but if they have in fact observed well, done their research and investigation ("Without investigation no right to speak"--Mao), and tried to understand the phenomenon in its entirety, the resulting work should be relevant and informative long after original events pass. We need only to think of such films as Borinage or How Yukong Moved the Mountain by Joris Ivens, or Kino-Pravda or Three Songs of Lenin by Dziga Vertov, or 79 Springtimes of Ho Chi Minh by Santiago Alvarez to see this is possible.

But to follow the standards of good radical reporting

in journalism, we must get beyond the conventions of the dominant documentary. Today's conventional film/video documentary has several typical characteristics which reinforce its general ideological function. First, it is usually constructed around a single protagonist, a set of related people, or several individuals. The emphasis is on the individual at present rather than collective history. This individual is depicted either as typical or sometimes as unusual (but then, implicitly or explicitly revealing of the typical, the odd ball remains framed by the dominant order). The documentary stresses such an emphasis through a number of style choices, including the following: framing which concentrates on the protagonist (often using a zoom lens to isolate or emphasize the character), the presentation of "significant" actions used to reveal personality; the use of "seeing" shots which give a general approximation of the protagonist's point of view; and the subjective use of sync sound which privileges what the protagonist says or hears. The documentary also often uses authorities, whom it frequently privileges as stars or to whom it gives narrational dominance. Editing and other elements tend to remain secondary or invisible compared to the focus on the main figure(s).

Other key elements of conventional documentary derive from the effort to maintain a conflict structure in the action; this is maintained by a unity of space or location and seeking after an interest-grabbing concern, i.e., the unusual or sensational. Further conventional elements coalesce into a code of "quality"--the one already well known and established in commercial work. Similarly a code of "objectivity" is evoked; two opposing sides must be put forward, with the film being somehow "outside of" or "above" the conflict.

Because the political situation is always changing, no single universal political criterion can apply to radical documentary. However, any fully revolutionary analysis within such work must answer two questions. First, what is the situation? Second, how can it change? In other words, the documentary must deal with structure and contradiction. These require distinctly different approaches from the usual "problem and solution" expository pattern so frequently used. Typically, problem, solution narrative organization removes the problem from its larger political, economic, and social framework and presents it on its most empirically observable level. To take an example from today's television news: a man

comes to the rescue of a "bag lady" who is being assaulted while sleeping in a public park. Problem: it's hard for homeless people to find safe places to sleep. The news offers no analysis of why the United States contains two million or so homeless people like her. In contrast, a radical documentary such as Jim Klein and Julia Reichert's Methadone: An American Way of Dealing offers a specific case study as well as a comprehensive analysis of heroin addiction and methadone maintenance as paired aspects of a larger system of social control of a segment of the population.

Radical documentary needs to get beyond the most immediate level of emotional involvement--isn't this shocking, deplorable, unjust, etc.?--and give viewers a way of understanding why this condition exists in the first place, the underlying causes for it, and its relation to other parts of the society. Without such a fuller conception, the immediate emotional response is easily turned toward a simple solution: change of heart, charity, or legislative reform. And the documentary then leaves the ongoing causes of the problem unexamined.

People often forget that the oppositional movement and its politics largely respond to the configuration of the dominant order and that as the established system changes, so will the resistance to it. Since World War II, the distinctive feature of successful radical movements has been their ability to link different kinds and aspects of oppression. This linking has come neither easily nor automatically, of course, but taking a long view of it, we can see a distinct difference between the Old Left's raising of class issues, defined in fairly strictly conceived economic terms, and a still-evolving contemporary radicalism which stresses the fundamental interrelation of class, race, and gender oppression within the context of an anti-imperialist consciousness and an insistence on social and cultural issues as well as economic ones. In fact, the most lively and effective left politics of our time emerges from coalitions which represent a range of interlocking concerns. In this context the substance and style of radical documentary must change to become more capable of working within a changing and evolving coalition. And makers, as well, need to be more flexible and able to work in a variety of ways, to fit different situations and possibilities.

The issues of form and politics which I've discussed so far can be considered in greater detail by discussing some

specific works. The War At Home (Barry Brown and Glenn Silber) works in a familiar recent genre--the radical nostalgia film. It combines footage of past events with contemporary interviews with participants. The film appeared at the same time as legislation to reinstate peacetime draft registration, and it found ready use in campus anti-draft organizing as well as getting some theatrical attention. As a documentary about the protest movement in Madison, Wisconsin from the mid-'60s to mid-'70s The War At Home exhibits many typical intermeshed form and content problems. The interviews are shot in a visually un compelling TV style which in turn visually heightens the historical footage. That footage largely comes from TV news coverage of the most public and "newsworthy" events, newsworthy according to broadcast journalism standards, which the film doesn't question. In this way, The War At Home unreflectively presents two levels of discourse. One level evokes the past by recalling--"what I thought then, what it felt like then,"--rather than critical memory--"what I think now of what we did then." The other discourse documents what TV news typically shows--the immediate and empirical. Thus we see confrontation, but not the planning and discussion that precedes it; tactics, but not the strategy; we see the results of bombing the Army Math Research Center building, but not the years of organizing and education that went on around that institution. As a result, the film produces one overwhelming interpretation of the past: we demonstrated, then the police attacked, so next time we got tougher. And in the absence of any other information, this seems to constitute an organizing strategy. In fact, it is a method which boils down to men escalating violent confrontation, which may go too far--i. e., inadvertently killing someone in the bombing. But at least, the film seems to conclude, you can elect a progressive hip mayor and get an ex-radical to head a government social control agency (VISTA).

The film signals such an attitude, with 1963 newsreel footage depicting Madison as "the All-American town." This setup makes the ensuing demonstration seem even more dramatic--protest just springing up like mushrooms after a shower. But even in this opening detail lies a major distortion. The state of Wisconsin has a long tradition of populism and founded the Progressive movement; industrial Milwaukee had socialist mayors for most of the 20th century; Madison was a haven for radicals of all stripes during the McCarthy period; and the campus was a favorite of East Coast red diaper babies. In the late '50s and '60s a progressive

campus ministry supported eating cooperatives, free university courses on social issues, avant-garde theatre, civil rights activism, and anti-nuke protest. (I speak from personal experience. As an undergrad at UW from '60-'64, I met ministers who had worked in San Francisco's gay community and been on civil rights demonstrations in the South, academics who had traveled to post-revolutionary Cuba, Old Leftists' children who visited the USSR and took supplies to striking miners in Harlan County, grad students putting out the early New Left intellectual journal Studies on the Left, and SNCC organizers fundraising for voter registration drives.)

Madison was anything but typical. But the film distorts this and in representing history actually drops out a good deal. What is left out or misrepresented reveals the film's weakness. The film repeats the same kind of confusion of image and truth which one of its interviewees expresses as he recalls how the sudden appearance of 25 black guys in berets and army jackets seemed to mean the revolution was at hand. Much of the movement disappears. The film drops out or gives token recognition to women, Native Americans, workers, gays, groups other than SDS, and radicals working in culture and arts. One of the most insulting examples comes with the film's only reference to feminism--a quick shot of a "Sisterhood Is Powerful" banner in the final credit roll. Similarly, the film never deals with capitalism (though it carefully includes a Businessman for Peace) and it misses the evolution of protest from predominantly pacifist anti-war to distinctly anti-imperialist. In this framework the film never examines the bizarre (and perhaps agent-inspired) tactics of Karl Armstrong's New Year's Gang, debates over strategy and tactics on the left, or associated organizing on and off campus--such as the remarkable growth of the nation's first Teaching Assistants Association to gain collective bargaining (one of its prime movers, Henry Haslach, is interviewed, but only as a former SDS figure).

In contrast, Mifflin Street (Howard Monath), a short documentary which covers the same period, comes much closer to capturing the fluid complexity of the Madison scene. By using heavily manipulated, optically printed images; multiple layers of sound, including music and overlaid voices; home movies footage mixed with dramatic reenactment, as well as interviews, it shows the student and counter-culture resistance from within. As in The War At Home, mayor Paul Soglin is interviewed, but in a patently

crude set-up which avoids the slick style of the feature documentary. The overall result establishes a kind of psychedelic history. In its negative aspects, at times it uncritically celebrates male fantasy and sexuality and sometimes disguises counter-culture elitism, as in repeated shots of people trying to overturn a bus. (Actually the bus had been rented by welfare mothers protesting cutbacks at the nearby state capitol. On their return they found this trashed vehicle for which they were financially liable.) My point is not that Mifflin Street is an exemplary film for all occasions, but that despite its limits, in comparison with The War At Home it underlines the latter's limits in form and politics. The War At Home presents a cleaned-up history in a flawless form. In the process it ignores the complications and complexity of the movement. The War At Home shows us Karl Armstrong in jail and his father reflecting on how he, the father, didn't realize that the government and media were lying about the war. But Mifflin Street gives the feeling of the frenetic community base of the movement, the context in which Armstrong could feel that bombing was appropriate, the people's lives--people who knew all along from street hassles, drug busts, tear gas in their neighborhood, and cops at their door that the government was an oppressive force and that the established media distorted events.

Makers

The social, political, institutional, personal, and historical positions of specific film and video makers affect radical documentary, although many ignore the question. Perhaps in response to Romantic theories of the artist, genius, and inspiration and to the actual obnoxious behavior of certain makers, in the past decade or so many critics have concentrated on the film/tape itself and not dealt with the actual producer and production situation.⁷ Yet for the documentarist, the issue doesn't go away; and among critics the net result in many cases has been to produce a criticism which does not and cannot say anything significant to makers.

The concrete situation of individual makers is something they must come to terms with precisely because building a contemporary radical movement depends on understanding the interrelation of race, gender, and class oppression. Minority media activists have constantly stressed the necessity of white radicals' coming to terms with racism and their own privilege. Feminists have criticized men for

not dealing with sexism in their behavior and in their documentaries. Because those issues have played such a central role in recent criticism and discussion about radical documentary--particularly in the wake of the Alternative Cinema Conference in 1979--I want to stress a related issue which is often not raised: that of class position and class politics.

Whatever their sex, race, and class origins, almost all documentary makers belong to a specific class--the petty bourgeoisie in Marxist terms--and a stratum of that class--intellectuals, in the broad sense, those whose training and work is centrally concerned with the production and dissemination of ideas, images, information and analyses. Intellectuals' work consists largely of manipulating things or information without consciousness of a larger context, without reflecting on whose interests are served. (Upper-level managers who hire them are usually quite consciously cognizant of those matters.) The key defining feature of the petty bourgeoisie as a class is its position in between: in between the capitalist class which owns the means of production and the working class which has its labor power to sell. As members of the in-between class, petty bourgeois media people like to think of themselves as "free professionals"--an attitude which matches their class interests. Precisely their class interest is to waver and not commit themselves, or if they do, to be free to reverse at a later point.

The ability to generate, manipulate and distribute sound and moving image material in a modern industrial culture is very specialized and typically requires large amounts of capital. It usually demands considerable means of production. To master the means of production, in turn, demands considerable technical skill and knowledge, including specialized skills in organizing the labor of the project as well as decision making in shaping and executing the product. The very attainment of these skills for someone in the working class raises them out of their class in significant ways. Often attainment of skills, as in the health profession, is class-stratified. Most typically, the training of working class media people gives them access only to restricted technical jobs, which, given the severe division of labor, does not grant them access to major decision making.

Typically the training phase of media work concentrates almost exclusively on production. In this way

it fits in with the logic of capitalist social relations. Very few film and video makers encounter a wide range of work and ideas in their training. The increasing, and increasingly destructive, split between production, on the one hand, and history, criticism, and theory on the other fuels the problem. The extreme division into specialties and areas of knowledge, craft, and methodology accentuates the difficulty. Most ways of learning production skills, from apprenticeship to formal academic training, involve learning only one way or a few similar ways of doing things. Without any further critical reflection or thoughtful historical understanding or comparison with other and different ways of making documentary, people learn certain technologies, procedures, ways of organization and working which are themselves ideological, though presented as "this is the way it's always done..." or "this is the norm in the industry..." or "this is the right way to do it." And while this is most obvious in university and technical school classes with a formulaic industry-oriented emphasis, in a more subtle but just as ideological way it permeates art schools. Here film courses take individual expression as the norm, but implicitly limit that initiative when teachers assume that other kinds of work are off-limits and show across-the-country-work from a remarkably similar set of examples.

Students who want to make radical documentary have to break consciously with often ruthlessly imposed norms of film practice. To do so, they must make a point of learning from other forms of documentary than those they are most familiar with. They must seek out a broader range of films and tapes to view, works from around the world and from the history of documentary practice. An ongoing process of self-education is an essential corrective if documentarists are not simply to repeat the assumptions of the status quo. It's the necessary foundation for their continuous renewal of vision and their reference from which to construct a genuinely new documentary practice as they engage in new realities.

The very nature of film and video work makes considerable economic demands on makers in terms of buying, renting, or getting access to equipment, paying for film and supplies and lab costs, etc. which emphasize its class-restrictive nature. When conducted in a deliberately "poor" way, as with Super 8 or $\frac{1}{2}$ " or $\frac{1}{4}$ " video, the built-in prejudice of the system is to conclude that thrifty means aesthetically poor.

Having learned how to make effective media, the committed documentarist faces a basic dilemma ... it doesn't go away. Media makers have to make a living unless they have unearned income or are supported by someone else. They want to use their skills and they want to make politically significant work. All these factors are only rarely compatible. It is virtually impossible to do politically radical work within the existing system such as with the networks, National Endowment grants, or PBS, particularly under a conservative government. So you can choose to make a living elsewhere and then be free to pursue your art and politics, but you only have your "free" time to do so. Or you can work in the industry and maintain your skills but probably have to work on projects which you find more or less ridiculous or even reprehensible.

Many people try to work in the media and build some kind of a career within it. But this puts certain constraints on what you can do. You have to accommodate yourself to the already existing system. Younger people starting out feel the pressure to get established, to have some kind of stability in what is a typically project-oriented field. Established people have acquired responsibilities, dependents, etc. which often act as a conservative drag on career decisions. And we are all painfully aware of the figure of the radical who, through "practical compromise," gets to the position of having some control over what he/she is doing, only to have sold out. Even the very rare reverse figure falls within a similar structural situation--what do you do when your film/tape on behalf of a cause suddenly nets you half a million dollars?

The key element here is precisely a class phenomenon--the extreme individualism of the petty bourgeoisie. Much more than the capitalist or working class person, the petty bourgeoisie holds to self-interested notions of autonomy, freedom, and self-determination. (And I speak here as a petty bourgeois intellectual.) Radical intellectuals' need for autonomy creates deep ambiguity in relation to the movement which supports them directly or indirectly, especially if they are radicals trying to make a living off of movement work. Most media work actually removes people from direct contact with the masses of people.

Once established in the media world, you are in the position of selling either a specific product--this film/tape--and are put in the position of being a small business entrepreneur; or you are selling your reputation in order to get

the chance to do more work, or another grant. Or sometimes you take up one role and then the other. The situation itself contributes to reinforcing sentimental politics. You see yourself meeting responsibilities simply by doing what you're doing. Or you react with cynicism and reckon with compromise, accepting it over principle or political judgment. Furthermore, once established, even alternative institutions become less likely to take risks. And even within an alternative you need capital and have to earn your own way, prove yourself, and justify your project.

The left, the "movement," is not able to deal with this very well. It is dominated by people who don't understand the use of visual media and who either see visual media as simply instrumental or reduce them to some verbal component. Yet only in establishing a relation with the left, in becoming politicized, can petty bourgeois media people break with the logical outcome of their class position and develop a class politics that gets beyond their immediate interests. Just as men can develop an understanding of individual and institutional sexism and contribute to the fight against it, just as whites can come to terms with racism and work to eradicate it, documentary film and video makers can understand class issues and make media which contributes to advancing the working class and combatting imperialism.

To make documentaries with strong working-class politics does not simply entail attaching some worn political formulae to working-class subject matter and using a conventional form. That will only produce left-wing hackwork. Radical media makers need new forms of collaboration in the making of the work and new ways of articulating class issues. Several recent documentaries are especially successful in showing what can be done. The Chicago film-making collective Kartemquin's Winnie Wright, Age 11 and Now We Live on Clifton are half-hour vérité-style documentaries which present working-class family life and community concerns from children's point of view--a perspective seldom given attention. The kids articulate class issues in a very concrete form, such as living in an interracial neighborhood and having to move because of gentrification. At the same time, the films provide recognition of the everyday, as when we see Winnie Wright disinterestedly doing homework while watching television. These films' strength lies in their ability to present working-class life without condescension or idealization. The contradictions stand clear, as seen in a shot of Winnie Wright, poised between child-

encompassing production and distribution-exhibition, and as having its own history within a set of changing expectations and situations, gives makers a more sophisticated view. Rather than being audio-visual illustrations of this or that political issue, today documentaries help the very cognition of political reality and have a crucial place as part of the ongoing discourse of the movement.

What You Take For Granted is constructed to both draw in and distance the audience by stressing the contradictions in working women's lives. The film becomes a topic of conversation, an active social phenomenon, as viewers work out for themselves after the screening their relation to the characters, the issues, and the questions presented. The film enters the lives of women and the feminist movement, not as a report on the politically correct line but as an investigation of the structured oppression of women and the contradictions within and between women.

To see documentary in this way--as an intervention, a provocation for discussion, a necessarily incomplete statement--restores to analytical documentary work the immediacy of reportage and the bold emotions of agitational film and video without letting the film/tape fall into rhetorical posturing, condescension to the audience, or ironic dryness. Understanding documentary as "complete" only when seen and reacted to shifts the maker's goals from producing a perfect, whole, comprehensive work to producing a work with new values and new designs, which will make it viable, interesting, and educational for a longer time. From this perspective, we can have no "One Size Fits All" correct form for documentary, because each work will have its own exhibition itinerary intersecting with its makers' goals and abilities. Nor is there simply a choice between wimpy reformism and heavy-rhetoric militancy. Rather, the political dimension of documentary becomes a process of educating the audience about the complexity of the subject matter, about the structures and contradictions of this situation so that they might grasp the situation's evolution when they see it at a later time. In other words, the documentary does not simply present the correct analysis but rather helps people to analyze their own and other situations. When a film/tape does this, it, in turn, changes the very nature and role of the maker who becomes less of an authority and more of a teacher.

In the process, the maker's own position in relation

to the events depicted becomes part of the heart of the work. Every documentary reveals, if nothing else, the relation between the maker and the people documented. In this way, ethnocentrism becomes a crucial issue; the filmmaker's class, race, and gender position (always present) becomes acute when dealing with different groups. At times this position becomes reflected directly, as in Louis Hock's initially introducing his community and neighbors and later taping while the "Migra" police are asking who he is in the middle of a roundup. At other times it appears indirectly, as in the intimacy of Everyday People's showing work procedures and the letter carrier's relation to the social and climatic environment on his/her route.

The importance of context for the political documentary is dramatized by the example of Los Hijos de Sandino (Sandino's Children; Kimberly Safford and Fred Barney Taylor). Shot in Super 8 and optically printed and manipulated in the step-up to 16mm, it shows daily life and festivals in and around Managua during the first anniversary in July 1980 of the Nicaraguan revolution. A Spanish-language soundtrack of local music, the radio, and location non-sync sound adds to the film's density. With exquisitely framed shots, rich in color and deliberately long, often slowed as if to savor the moment, as well as "exotic" (to U.S. ears) soundtrack, the film can be seen on one level as an arty travelogue--an avant-garde filmmakers' trip to Nicaragua, heavy on local color. Indeed, the makers even thought of calling it "Tourists of the Revolution" to mark their own position in relation to their subject. But that label does not convey the film's only level.

In the same way that a Gestalt psychology foreground/background figure demands an alteration of views, Los Hijos de Sandino has another dimension, especially for anyone familiar with Latin American life. Depending on the context and the audience's knowledge and expectation, the film changes. It has been widely screened in conjunction with Nicaragua support work in Mexico, where it is understood as a vibrant portrait of the Nicaraguan people and the Sandinist movement. Similarly, shown to Latino audiences in the U.S., the film finds a warm reception for its strongly emotional moments (Fidel Castro's addressing the crowd, military units passing in review, boys diving into water while a male voice-over describes how as a child he was afraid of the National Guard and ran from them, how he went off to join the rebels, and was captured and tortured). In fact, the current major re-injection of open emotion into

recent radical documentary must be linked in part to the explosion of media work about Central America and the Latin insistence on speaking from the heart as well as the head. And music and radio, as primary radical forms in Latin America, are now contributing to our new understanding of the political use of sound in media.

Shown in Nicaragua, Los Hijos de Sandino elicited enthusiastic audience response for its lyrical beauty and emotional resonance; dissent came only from politicians who complained that the film wasn't political enough and didn't explain enough. I think this is a case where the people are smarter than their leaders. The film presents the poetry of the revolution; that is part of the total picture never captured in maps, charts, and official talking-head interviews with officials. Instead, the film is constantly transforming its own images. The standard tourist shot of a group of youths pushing each other and posing for the camera becomes something totally different when it is held for a long time and one fellow in military fatigues begins putting his beret at a more rakish angle and pulling up his collar in a preening gesture. (See photo, p. 339.) Here, the others laugh at him, he smiles too, and the exchange of glances back and forth to the camera (and its obviously present operator) turns the moment into something shared, mutually enacted, and mutually recognized.

To help develop a new context for this film the makers encourage screening it following John Chapman's dramatic reportage of the last weeks of Somoza's overthrow, Nicaragua: Scenes from the Revolution, also shot in Super 8. Chapman provides background information and links it to astonishing action of children on the barricades and in the streets. Safford and Taylor provide the cultural, social and everyday moments that let us into the rich, complex dimension of a new revolutionary society, as in a sequence where we hear revolutionary commercials for using the bus and women vending fruit to bus passengers. At the end of the film, after seeing marching columns passing in review at the Independence Day celebration--columns containing men and women, children and adults, and old veterans of Sandino's original army--the official ceremony ends, and suddenly a thunderstorm breaks out. The rain becomes a metaphor of transformation, as rain-soaked militiamen jump up and down in slow-motion celebration. Moving from formality and order to spontaneous joy this sequence encapsulates much of the



Los Hijos de Sandino is a film constantly transforming its own images. The standard tourist shot of youths posing for the camera, held for a long time, becomes a moment mutually shared, enacted and recognized by filmmakers and subjects.

film's form as well as the film's political significance. The tourist camera and tape recorder pay attention to the official, but the film constantly recognizes the human and everyday. People stare back at the camera, at the audience, changing who and what is the subject. Certainly Los Hijos de Sandino is not analytical in the sense of providing a summary of conditions, causes and results, yet it analyzes an experienced human reality--the Nicaraguan revolution as that revolution looks to people on the streets--and transforms the tourist-travelogue film in the process.

Many radical documentarists have accepted a familiar form or reproduced an established politics and aimed at the existing distribution-exhibition system. The new documentary work I have discussed does not fit easily into conventional categories. We live in a time of rapid political and cultural change. New groupings are emerging which do not fit traditional Left thought and new coalitions form around new

issues. At the same time the media are undergoing vast technological change and this is transforming financing, production, distribution, and reception. Few generalizations remain valid in such a period. Everything, old and new, must be examined, questioned and tested. We must deduce our aesthetics, like our politics, from understanding our situation and responding to our movement's needs.

Notes

- 1 My central reference for this discussion is the U.S. in the mid-80s. These issues would doubtless have a different priority elsewhere. In addition, matters of financing, distribution, and exhibition are essential. This essay reflects lessons from practice, particularly my films The Jerry Lewis Labor Day Telethon (with Liz Schillinger), The Ten Million Dollar Bash, Men Men Men, and Rising Expectations (in progress). On other occasions I've written about political documentaries by people I did not know; because these issues are so central to my current creative and intellectual work, here I chose to concentrate on work by people I know well and have worked with: Michelle Citron, JoAnn Elam, Kimberly Safford and Fred Barney Taylor. I first presented some of these ideas at the Alternative Cinema Conference in 1979 and they have been shaped by many people since then, especially in discussions with John Hess and Julia Lesage. I hope this stresses the collaborative nature of current theoretical-practical work in political documentary. I also had the opportunity to discuss their work with the Kartemquin filmmakers, and Louis Hock and Howard Monath.
- 2 In addition to her essay on Self Health and Rape in this volume, see Lesage, "One Way Or Another: Dialectical Filmmaking in a Post-Revolutionary Society," Jump Cut, no. 20 (1979) and "For Our Urgent Use: Films on Central America," Jump Cut, no. 27 (1982).
- 3 Eileen McGarry, "Documentary, Realism and Women's Cinema," Women & Film, 2:7 (1975).
- 4 Bill Nichols, Ideology and the Image (Bloomington: Indiana U. Press, 1981), pp. 170-284, and Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," Film Quarterly, 36:3 (Spring, 1983). Examples of recent discussion of these issues:

Jeffrey Youdelman, "Narration, Invention, & History: A Documentary Dilemma," Cineaste, 12:2 (1982); John Hess, "Notes on U.S. Radical Film, 1967-80," Jump Cut, no. 21 (1979); B. Ruby Rich and Linda Williams, "The Right of Re-vision: Michelle Citron's Daughter Rite," Film Quarterly, 35 (Fall, 1981). Although dealing largely with still photography, two important contributions to radical documentary theory are: Martha Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)" in Rosler, Three Works (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981) and Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on The Politics of Representation)," Massachusetts Review, 19:4 (Winter 1978). In addition to Cineaste and Jump Cut, I frequently find important discussions of documentary in Afterimage (US), The Independent (US), Fuse (Canada), Film News (Australia) and Camerawork (UK).

- 5 Historians have been especially perceptive in discussing the wave of radical history films. See, for example, Sonya Michel, "Feminism, Film and Public History," Radical History Review, no. 25 (1981); Michael H. Frisch, "The Memory of History," Radical History Review, no. 25 (1981); John Demeter, "Independent Film & Working Class History: A Review of North-ern Lights and The Wobblies," Radical America, 14:1 (1980); Linda Gordon, "Union Maids: Working Class Heroines," Jump Cut, no. 14 (1977); Sue Davenport, "The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter: Invisible Working Women," Jump Cut, no. 28 (1983).
- 6 The background and events as well as the film are analyzed in the exemplary study by Marvin Surkin and Dan Georgakas, Detroit: I Do Mind Dying (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975).
- 7 I am not trying to argue the meaning, validity, or value of works on the basis of the maker's intentions. I am saying that the documentarist's goals and anticipated circulation and use of the work must be considered. Pure formalist analysis, dealing with none of this, has a very limited usefulness for film and video makers. It is interesting to notice in this regard that the most formalist media work produced cannot be understood alone. It depends on personal appearances, interviews, manifestoes, critical

articles based on discussions with the maker, and current critical-theoretical fads, fashions, and posturings.

PART III

CONTEMPORARIES: THE THIRD WORLD